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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 ABU DHABI 000767

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/16/2015  
TAGS: PREL PTER MCAP IZ IR SA SY LE AF TC  
SUBJECT: GENERAL ABIZAID VISITS ABU DHABI

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (S) Summary: CENTCOM Commander Gen. Abizaid met with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces General Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MbZ) February 14 to discuss Iraq's security situation in the wake of the January 30 elections. They also discussed other regional security developments, including Syria, Iran, Pakistan, and former Lebanese Prime Minister Al Hariri's assassination earlier in the day. MbZ focused on UAE fears of a future extremist threat from Saudi Arabia. He said the UAE was acquiring sophisticated weapons systems, including the F-16 Block 60 aircraft, as insurance against both Iran and any potential threat from Saudi Arabia should an extremist regime emerge there. It was the most pessimistic we have seen MbZ on a perceived threat from Saudi Arabia.

¶2. (S) Summary continued: MbZ told us that the war on terror should be an Arab fight, and that Arabs had to play a larger role. MbZ asked for more timely notification about UAE nationals captured in Iraq. MbZ and his Special Operations Commander requested more active combat assignments for the UAE's 250-man Special Forces contingent in Afghanistan, especially near the Pakistani border. End Summary.

¶3. (U) On February 14, CENTCOM Commander Gen. Abizaid met with MbZ over dinner. Others attending were Interior Minister Sheikh Saif bin Zayed (MbZ's half-brother); Information Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed (AbZ) (MbZ's

full brother); UAE Armed Forces Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Hamad Thani Al Rumaithy; Special Forces Commander Brigadier Jumaa Al Bawardi; Director for Military Intelligence Brigadier Essa Al Mazrouie; Ambassador; CENTCOM POLAD Ambassador John Holzman; Col. Tom Lynch of the Commander,s Action Group; Executive Officer Col. Joe Reynes; and USLO Chief. Gen. Abizaid met separately with Lt. Gen. Hamad Thani on February 115. (Note: Gen. Abizaid had met Sheikhs MbZ, Saif, and Abdullah earlier in the day at the International Defense Exhibition )- IDEX -) as they toured the American pavilion. End note.)

Lebanon/Syria

14. (C) As Gen. Abizaid and MbZ sat down at the table February 14, MbZ asked bluntly, &Could Bashar (Al Assad) be that stupid?8 Sheikh Abdullah read an excerpt from the Syrian President,s statement in which he condemned the &terrible, criminal action8 and expressed &solidarity with brother Lebanon in these serious circumstances.8 Abdullah and MbZ were dismissive of Syria,s official reaction, and said they supported the French government,s request for an international investigation into the assassination. Abizaid conveyed the USG,s sense of shock at the Hariri assassination, as well as our belief that the people of Lebanon deserve the freedom to choose their leaders free of intimidation and terror. During their meeting the following morning, Lt. Gen. Hamad Thani reiterated to Abizaid that Bashar was not in control, and that Syria,s &old guard8 are &corrupt and still dangerous.8 The Baathists, he added, are still a force in Syria.

Saudi Arabia

15. (S) Foremost on MbZ,s mind, however, was the potential threat from Saudi Arabia (assuming Saudi Arabia one day were ruled by Islamic extremists), a theme he returned to time and again during the dinner conversation. In fact, it was the darkest and most pessimistic we have seen MbZ on Saudi Arabia. Abizaid described how extremists go to Saudi mosques, target Saudi men in the 17-19 age group, and indoctrinate them. They then whisk away these young recruits to Damascus, issue them new IDs, then send them as part of &suicide bomber8 groups to carry out operations inside Iraq. These foreign fighters, many of whom have been captured by U.S. forces in Iraq, are not welcomed by Iraqis, Abizaid said. DMI Director Brigadier Al Mazrouie suggested that DMI assign some of its men to Damascus airport to &check on who is coming in and out8 of Syria.

16. (S) MbZ then talked at length about the Saudi leadership,s challenge. Saudi leaders no longer hold the position of respect they had in the 60s and 70s. MbZ also was dismissive of the International Counterterrorism Conference that Riyadh hosted February 5-8. The UAE opted not to send &serious8 counterterrorism experts to the conference because it regarded the conference as a public relations event, said MbZ. Interior Minister Sheikh Saif emphasized that there needs to be more regional sharing of information about CT and security issues, especially by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

17. (S) Still on the Saudi theme, MbZ for the first time linked his country,s decision to adopt a sophisticated defense posture (including the acquisition of 80 F-16 Block 60 aircraft) to a potential attack from Saudi Arabia, should the KSA regime be overthrown by Islamic extremists. The UAE has always perceived Iran as the primary conventional threat, he said. Now, however, MbZ said he worries increasingly about the prospect that a revolt by Islamic extremists in KSA might succeed there. Should an extremist regime come to power in Riyadh, how was he going to bring down their F-15s? Certainly not with the UAE,s fleet of Mirages, he said.

18. (C) MbZ also was seized with the issue of terrorism financing, particularly the links between Saudi Arabia, Ansar

Al Islam and Abu Musab Al Zarqawi. He said that the UK had (indirectly) passed information to the UAE on terrorism financing trails, and asked whether the U.S. had seen similar information. We noted that terrorism financing had been one of the major themes during White House Homeland Security Advisor Fran Townsend's visit to the UAE a week earlier, and that the U.S. and UAE were working together closely on the issue. Abizaid opined that if Zarqawi were not captured or killed in Iraq, then he would likely move south, and could easily move to Saudi Arabia, and it will really get bad.<sup>8</sup> Both he and MbZ characterized Saudi Arabia as the future center of gravity<sup>8</sup> in the war on terror.

¶19. (C) As he often does in meetings with USG visitors, MbZ shared his views about the importance of proper education standards in the Islamic world. He observed that an end to the dominance of the radicalized madrassa school systems was vital to winning the war against extremist ideology and terrorism over the long term.

Iraq

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¶110. (C) MbZ and AbZ had exchanged thoughts about Iraq's elections with Gen. Abizaid earlier in the day at IDEX. AbZ expressed satisfaction that the Iraqi people had turned out in significant numbers to vote on January 30. Both Abizaid and his UAE interlocutors shared the sentiment that Iraq's Sunnis had been unwise to boycott the elections. While MbZ expressed misgivings about Iran's influence in Iraq after the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) victory, Abizaid said both Sunnis and Shi'a Iraqis are Iraqis and Arabs first. The United States did not necessarily see the UIA election results as a victory for Iran.

¶111. (C) In his meeting with Abizaid, Lt. Gen. Hamad Thani asked how long it would take to rebuild Iraq's military. The U.S. intends to build up Iraq's armed forces capability and thus be able to provide a fundamental security role<sup>8</sup> by December 2005, Abizaid replied. He added that there could be a substantial reduction<sup>8</sup> in U.S. forces by 2006, and more Iraqis in charge. Hamad Thani expressed concern that the Iraqi Chief of Staff had no vision.<sup>8</sup> Echoing the previous evening's discussion, Abizaid and Hamad Thani also shared concerns about Iran's influence. Abizaid noted that one of the warning signs of Iranian interference would be if the constitutional process in Iraq were not followed as currently envisioned.

¶112. (C) Hamad Thani said he was worried about a revolutionary export of Iran's brand of Islam to southern Iraq, that would in turn spread to Kuwait. &Then we would have another problem on our hands,<sup>8</sup> he stated.

UAE Detainees

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¶113. (S) MbZ raised the issue of his need to receive timely notification about UAE nationals detained by Coalition forces in Iraq. MbZ suggested that UAE military intelligence officers could question Emirati nationals held by the Coalition in Iraq. &If they say five words, we can tell whether they are from the UAE,<sup>8</sup> MbZ said. Gen. Abizaid welcomed questioning by UAE authorities. (Note: We are aware of three UAE nationals being detained by Coalition forces in Iraq: Musalem Al Sayri, Adnan Mahmoud Hamood, and Awad Al Mustad. End note.) MbZ had learned from Iraqi TV that Emiratis had been captured in Fallujah and had contacted Embassy Abu Dhabi. It then took several days for the Embassy to receive confirmation from Baghdad of these names and to pass the information back to MbZ's staff. (Comment: MbZ is looking to speed up a time-consuming process. As we understand it, the current process is as follows: The UAE Embassy in Baghdad sends a letter to the U.S. Ambassador in Iraq requesting access. MNF-I forwards the request to CENTCOM JSD, which in turn either obtains CENTCOM approval, or goes to the Joint Staff. Once approved, MNF-I and UAE DMI are informed. At that point, there would be coordination by

DMI and MNF-I on meeting times and dates. End comment.) Abizaid and MbZ agreed to have quarterly exchanges of information on this process, and on related intelligence matters. But as he has told visitors before, MbZ said he would prefer that the Coalition forces kill, rather than capture, these fighters because he does not want them to return to the UAE where he believes they are likely to stir up trouble.

#### Afghanistan

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¶14. (S) MbZ expressed a strong desire to &toughen8 his country,s special forces, 250 of whom are currently deployed to Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. The current contingent (the fourth deployed since October 2003) has been in Afghanistan for three months and has not seen any action, he said. He asked Abizaid to consider allowing the UAE force closer to the Pak-Afghan border. Meanwhile, 35 members from Bahrain,s Special Forces are training with UAE special forces in Hatta (eastern UAE), with a goal to deploy to Afghanistan in April, our interlocutors said.

¶15. (S) In his meeting with Hamad Thani, Abizaid thanked him for the role UAE troops were playing in Afghanistan. Hamad Thani said he sees a threefold purpose for the deployment. It deters extremism, demonstrates a commitment to a common cause, and provides a mechanism for UAE forces to gain battlefield experience against possible future enemies.

#### Pakistan

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¶16. (C) MbZ and Abizaid agreed that President Musharraf was well in control of the situation in Pakistan. MbZ said that he had given Musharraf advice, but that he was seized with the fact that Baluchistan remained a &wild place.8 MbZ recalled that during his hunting trip to Pakistan 10 days ago, he had lost a falcon in Baluchistan. When MbZ attempted to follow the bird,s path, his Pakistani security escorts reportedly refused to go further, so MbZ and his Emirati escorts went in alone to retrieve the falcon. MbZ said the illicit drug trade contributes significantly to the province,s hostile reputation, which in turn poses a major challenge to Musharraf.

#### Meeting with New Armed Forces Chief of Staff

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¶17. (C) Following on the previous evening,s dinner conversation, Gen. Abizaid met separately with Lt. Gen. Hamad Thani, who succeeded MbZ as the UAE Armed Forces, Chief of Staff in November 2004. MbZ told Abizaid that he had turned over &a number of issues8 to Hamad Thani, clearly indicating to Abizaid that military authority had changed hands. The February 15 meeting between Abizaid and Hamad Thani was the first significant exchange between them. Hamad Thani explained that his focus had been on getting his armed forces &trained and ready8 to fight transnational terrorism. So far, he said, &we have seen no imminent threat,8 referring to the current UAE domestic situation. He went on to state that the UAE has put in a lot of effort to &guard8 the border )- both sea and land including dedicating five battalions to this effort. He also talked about an air surveillance balloon being used along the UAE-Saudi border, and he described the construction of a fence along approximately 1,200 kilometers of the border.

¶18. (C) Abizaid and Hamad Thani agreed to meet more frequently, and Abizaid proposed a concept of quarterly staff talks designed to improve awareness of regional security issues. Hamad Thani said that, building on the Joint Military Commission,s success in January 2005, the UAE could host a joint counterterrorism planning meeting. Abizaid said that was possible, but explained that his intent was to hold staff-level (J2, J3 and J5) talks with CENTCOM,s UAE counterparts to discuss routine operations. Such talks would be in addition to J2 intelligence exchanges, the first of

which is likely to occur March 14-16 (DOVE PINE). Hamad Thani concurred with Abizaid's idea.

Comment:

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¶119. (C) We think it is significant that MbZ now believes that the greatest potential threat to the UAE could come not/not from long-time nemesis Iran, but from Saudi Arabia, should the KSA regime be overthrown by Islamic extremists. MbZ's views about UAE nationals captured in Iraq revealed his lack of tolerance for extremist elements in UAE society. He has frequently told USG visitors that he would prefer that Coalition forces kill extremists rather than capture them and risk having them return to their respective countries where they could stir up more trouble. Abizaid's discussions with MbZ and Hamad Thani also made clear that the Emiratis are focusing increasingly on troop readiness in the UAE.

¶120. (C) Comment continued: Lt. Gen. Hamad Thani was more at ease offering his own analysis of the region than we have ever seen him. He seemed to have genuinely stepped into his role as the UAE Armed Forces Chief of Staff ) in front of his boss. His reasoning behind the UAE Special Forces, deployment in Afghanistan indicates he has the correct strategic picture of the region.

SISON